

Introduction: African and Diasporan Poetry

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Critical scholarship on African and diasporan literature is mainly biased towards prose narratives. This has tended to create the impression that genres such as poetry and drama have less significance in the creation of African and Diasporan consciousness. The canonisation of the analyses of prose is revealed in such magisterial works as *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (2007) in which many of the articles comment on the novelist form. To be fair, African readers and their western counterparts have come to view African literature as a commodity of cultural and spiritual exchange through the agency of narrative prose. Part of the reason is the politics of publishing that implicates who has the resources to publish authoritative texts on what constitutes African literature. Many readers will find the recently published work called *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: The Novel in Africa and the Caribbean since 1950* edited by Simon Gikandi (2016) very useful on its deliberate slant on the novel genre. This is not new as western countries had a head start in defining what constitutes literature largely explained in the history of the novel itself (Watt 1957); secondly, the history of the use of the novel in colonising Africa (Conrad 1906), and; thirdly the appropriation of the prose narratives by nationalists who used them to elaborate their own forms of derivative modernity in the era after independence (Okonkwo 1999).

Many of the African teachers were educated in colonial schools. These new African teachers, nationalists in Africa and in the diaspora in European and American metropolises, emerged out of these ghettos of colonial education armed with singular and narrowed understanding of the discipline of African studies. The black teachers and preachers (Viet-Wild 1999) were to prove decisive in shaping the direction of African literature as they were better placed educationally and sometimes consulted by colonial and postcolonial African governments to determine the syllabi in African schools of African literatures. Many favoured and adopted forms of literary modernism in which realism was taken as the intellectual yardstick for composing literary works of art (Gikandi 2012). Poetic genres, especially those African ones with deep roots in African belief-systems, worldview anchored in myths, legend, folktales and Diasporan reconstituted cultures created in the forge of new painful experiences which favoured hybrid identities were viewed as a form

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of “literary lack” (320). The proliferation of criticism of the novel and its subgenres of autobiography, memoir, travelogue, diary form was calculated to molest the African and Diasporan poetic imagination. The evidence of this form of arrested decolonisation (Jeyifo 2007) in the field of defining what would come to pass as African literature is manifest in the paucity of anthologies of books solely devoted to analysing African and Diasporan poetry.

A further misconception popularised by African scholars themselves is that the discipline of African literature exists only in the languages of the colonisers, viz, English, French, Portuguese, and German and that there could not be African and Diasporan poetry in African languages. Hence the lack of critical works on African poetry in African languages, analysed using African languages. In reality, poetry in the English language actually constitutes a small fraction of African and Diasporan creativity. There is need to foreground the significance of African and Diasporan poetry in English and African Languages. There is need to analyse poetry composed in English in Africa by African and Diasporan scholars, but using African indigenous languages in just the same way English is used to analyse, Shona, Amharic, Zulu, and Swahili language-based poetry, to mention but a few. At a thematic level, the few early critical studies on poetry focussed on themes of cultural nationalism (Zimunya & Kadhani 1982). The few studies on poetry in African post-colonial and Diasporan contexts that sought to revise critiques of cultural nationalism, emphasised engaging with poetry on of memories of resistance to different forms of oppression. This, ironically, downplayed other themes such as love, nature, environmental, HIV and Aids poetry that in fact were and continue to be the staple themes of oral genre poetry in Africa since the precolonial period up to the present. This absence of critical works by Africans in recent scholarship works impoverishes the critical study of the continuities and discontinuities manifesting in African and Diasporan poetry. There is need for scholarship that engages and foregrounds analyses of poetry created by different generations. This would allow one to critically explore continuities, reveal creative disruptions, highlight creative nuances and formal innovations with poetic genres. This would show how these poetic trends manifest dissident desires within African and Diasporan poetic traditions.

It is against the context of a willed de-creation of critical studies on African and Diasporan poetry by African and western scholars to comment rigorously on African and Diasporan poetry that the need to compile and edit two volumes of African and Diasporan poetry as a legitimate and valid critical area of intellectual inquiry in its own right, arose. *Journal of Literary Studies* is an appropriate platform as it encourages criticism of literature in all its forms and genres. The variety of the themes that would be covered in the two envisaged volumes on the criticism of African and Diasporan poetry would include but were not limited to exploring attempts at theorising postcolonial

African and Diasporan poetry, debating style in African and Diasporan poetic traditions, and analysing the shifting thematic trends in African Poetry. We hoped that contributors would also tackle issues related to epic Poetry in Africa and the Diaspora, poetry of colonial struggle and postcolonial resistance, women's poetic genres, oral poetry and its relation to the written form, and oral performance as poetry. Some contributors opted to explore the interface between orality and the written poetic traditions, while others focused their critical gaze on poetry and critique African Politics, and identities. We would wish that in the second volume, themes like ritual poetry, music and poetry, poetry in African Languages and the role of poetry in economic and social marginalisation or transformations in the African and Diasporan postcolonies are considered as valid areas of intellectual ruminations.

Rangarirai Alfred Musvoto's article argued that Chenjerai Hove's two collections of poetry: *Up in Arms* (1982) and *Red Hills of Home* (1985) focus on the contested subject of nationalism in Zimbabwe and its implications for both national and private identities. Maurice Vambe's article explores Hove's unpublished manuscript, *Love and Other Ghosts* (2009) and Vambe argues that the subversive power of this collection is precisely its refusal to conceive of protest politics in terms only of slogans against the ruling elites. Vambe demonstrates that Hove's *Love and Other Ghosts* creates its own fictional and poetic context that shows that even in the most hostile circumstances, ordinary people can still organise their lives around those values that are life-sustaining. Senayon Olaoluwa reads Olu Oguibe's *A Gathering Fear* (1992) as an exemplification of the dilemma exiles are confronted with in their relationship with countries of destination and homeland. Godwin Makaudze and Isaac Mhute's article explores Ishmael Penyai's poetry and the two critics argue that the uniqueness of this poetry is that it combines themes on the private and public sphere, on love, the family and education.

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